WITHOUT DISTINCTION OF RACE OR COLOR

Thoughts on Root Races

Helen V. Zahara

The Theosophical Society in America

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Some time ago I was traveling through parts of Southeast Asia—Indonesia, Bangkok, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Japan—and in various places had the opportunity to meet with theosophical students. There is great interest in the concepts of Theosophy among many people, but they often are faced with important questions which concern them personally in connection with the esoteric teachings regarding root-races. As they begin to read theosophical literature they come across statements which indicate that people of different ethnic and cultural groups belong to different root-races or sub-races, which are listed in an ascending order. Those who are white-skinned or are from India (and Pakistan) are classified as belonging to the Fifth Root-Race, the Aryan. But the great majority of peoples—the Mongolians, Indonesians, Chinese, Japanese, Malays, and so on—are listed as being Fourth Root-Race, Atlantean as it is called. Some have interpreted this to be a rung lower on the evolutionary scale, although of course it is not so. On more than one occasion during my travels a highly educated, intelligent and aspiring seeker has come to me and referred to the idea that he cannot expect to make much progress this life as he is "only Fourth Root-Race." The implication given to him from reading our literature is that he may be less evolved or even inferior to a man of the Fifth Root-Race.

The same question applies to people of

African descent, who are often labeled as "remnants of the Third Root-Race," and the inference arises that they are somehow limited in their potentiality because of this. For instance, not long ago I met a young scientist from West Africa who had joined The Theosophical Society. He told me that when he began to study Theosophy he was informed by one of his fellow West Africans, also a member of the Society, that according to Theosophy the black race was the lowest on the evolutionary ladder, the white being the most advanced spiritually. While in black bodies they would make only limited progress; they would have to go through the yellow race and later the white race. When this young man traveled to Europe and North America he was told by Theosophists that he was probably in a white body during his previous incarnation and had been sent to Africa on purpose to help his fellows. What offended him was the idea that no intellectual or spiritual achievement could occur among blacks unless they had already been white. He began to believe that The Theosophical Society supports racism and he could not equate this with the Society's first Object which refers to the universal brotherhood of humanity, without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste, or color.

If we consider some of the studies of psychologists regarding the development of self-images and goals, and the idea that people act in accordance with what is expected of them, one cannot help wondering what our literature and our comments about root-races may have done in affecting those who have reacted to these ideas in terms of their own self-esteem or expectancy. In our Society, whose first Object recognizes the brotherhood of humanity, we have this strange paradox of a great vision of unity in which there are no distinctions and yet a system of thought which often leads to the pigeonholing of whole groups of people into distinct categories, based on their color and ethnic background.

The Concept of the Root Races

If we examine the concept of root-races as elaborated in our literature, we find it is very complex and we can understand how conflicting views could have arisen. There are references to the development of different root-races and sub-races occurring in various parts of the world, in different historical periods, and among particular peoples. For example, the cradle of the Third Root-Race, the Lemurian, is said to have been in the Pacific Ocean and to have stretched through what is now Central Africa. In the Third Root-Race, according to H. P. Blavatsky in *The Secret Doctrine*, there occurred the separation of the sexes. This was about eighteen million years ago, which is when true physical man with a bony structure appeared. Obviously, however, the descendants of those people today could not be the same. They must have evolved physically, emotionally and mentally. In fact, H. P. B. states: "When therefore . . . we speak of men who inhabited this Globe 18,000,000 years ago, we have in mind neither the men of our present races, nor the present atmospheric laws, thermal conditions, etc." (*The Secret Doctrine*, Adyar ed., Vol. 2, p. 333.)

At the time of the development of the Third Root-Race, mankind—according to *The Secret Doctrine*—had developed only three senses: hearing, touch and sight. Since then two more senses have been awakened: taste in the Fourth Root-Race and smell in the Fifth Root-Race. We know that the so-called remnants of the Third Root-Race have also acquired the five senses and therefore they have characteristics which belong to the Fifth Root-Race. So they cannot be thought of as being like their ancestors, and they should not be referred to as Third Root-Race at all.

If we consider also those who are said to be of the Fourth Root-Race, or their descendants, including the millions of Asia

(excluding India and Pakistan), we know that they too have five senses. It is possibly about four million years since the Atlantean Root-Race reached its peak, and the evolution of the physical body, emotions and mind, has continued since then with peoples everywhere.

In *The Secret Doctrine* H. P. B. states there is an enormous overlapping of one root-race over the root-race that succeeds it, and the older root-races take on the characteristics of the younger: ". . . the Races, sub-races, etc. down to their smallest ramifications, overlap and are entangled with each other until it is nearly impossible to separate them." (ibid., Vol. 3, p. 432.)

With the peoples of the world being thrown into closer and closer proximity, all cultures are beginning to share their talents and cultural patterns with others to a much greater extent, so that there is much more of a world culture developing. Therefore the overlapping and mingling is taking place to an even greater extent than when H. P. B. wrote those words nearly a century ago.

The most important aspect of the root-race teaching, it seems, relates to the flow of life and the unfoldment of consciousness. According to my understanding of the system, the first two root-races, although only at the etheric level, began to develop the capacity to comprehend sensation and perception in a very rudimentary way. Then, as physical man appeared, there occurred the awakening of emotion and the beginning of mentality. Later there was said to be the development of lower mind. Now has come the awakening of the higher mind. We must remember, however, that these different states of consciousness are by no means fully refined and perfected. The mind, for instance, is not expected to reach its full potential until evolution has passed through the fifth round.

In all countries and within all cultures we find that all five senses are active. Likewise

all five states of consciousness are wakened, although in varying degrees. The emphasis and development varies from culture to culture and from individual to individual, although the potential for unfoldment exists in all. It is as if a spotlight rests on a certain culture for the stimulation of a particular quality or capacity and then spreads out to embrace all. For instance, technology—as a product of the mind—has developed in the West, but if peoples everywhere did not have the capacity to comprehend and respond there would be no point in trying to teach them how to adapt technology for their own use. A good example of the ability of an isolated group to jump from a neolithic way of life to the twentieth century was the achievement of the people of Manus Island off New Guinea, which Dr. Margaret Mead observed between the 1920's and 1960's. In Africa too there are various groups taking a similar leap, indicating that the Fifth Root-Race tendencies exist in all. In this regard there is a very interesting statement by H. P. B. on Africa which we might well consider:

> The Africans have not left their continent for several hundred thousands of years. If tomorrow the continent of Europe were to disappear and other lands to re-emerge instead, and if the African tribes were to separate and scatter on the face of the Earth, it is they who, about a hundred thousand years hence, would form the bulk of the civilized nations. And it is the descendants of those of our highly cultured nations, who might have survived on some one island, without any means of crossing the new seas, that would fall back into a state of relative savagery. Thus the reason given for dividing humanity into *superior* and *inferior* races falls to the ground and becomes a fallacy. (Ibid., Vol. 3, p. 423.)

In giving the example of technology as a product of the Western mind, it must be remembered that this in itself is not evi-

dence of spiritual unfoldment. We know only too well that the great discoveries of science have been turned to the development of greater and greater instruments of destruction, although other discoveries have been used for the benefit of man. Mind, unless tempered by the qualities of compassion, understanding and brotherhood can be more savage in its action than the instinct of an animal. Furthermore, the aesthetic qualities infused with emotion are equally as important as mind.

So in our evolutionary unfoldment we need the qualities of all the developmental phases (root-races) in their highest and purest form. Not until we reach the perfect man will this occur.

Another important point arising from the occult teaching is that all humanity in the spiritual sense, as opposed to the psychic and physical, is made up of what is technically described as "second class monads." (The "first class monads" are the "Lunar Pitris," the "fathers" who provided the forms for the "second class monads"—our present day humanity.) We are all from one class of monads, moving through the various cultures as part of the evolutionary pattern of our globe.

Origin of Terms

It is interesting to study the origin of some of the terms used in the theosophical system which developed in the early days of our movement when the Adept Brothers were instructing Mr. A. P. Sinnett, Mr. A. O. Hume, and others, through their letters. Apparently there were no terms in the English language to describe some of the concepts which were being conveyed. Writing to Mr. Hume on June 30, 1882, the Mahatma K. H. said: ". . . I will draw your attention to the tremendous difficulty of finding appropriate terms in English which would convey to the educated European mind even an approximately correct notion about the

various subjects we will have to treat upon." (*The Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett*, third ed., p. 60.) The Mahatma M. wrote to Mr. Sinnett: ". . . you ought to come to some agreement as to the terms used when discussing cyclic evolutions. Our terms are untranslatable . . ." (Ibid., p. 70.) The Mahatma K. H. again wrote to Mr. Hume in July 1882: "M. [the Mahatma Morya] advised Mr. Sinnett strongly to agree upon a nomenclature before going any further." (Ibid., p. 80.) And in the same letter: "Our mystic terms in their clumsy re-translation from the Sanskrit into English are as confusing to us as they are to you . . ." (Ibid., p. 83.) Also in that letter: "It is possible that my nomenclature is faulty; you are at liberty in such a case to change it." (Ibid., p. 82.)

The term root-race became adopted to describe a phase of human development and it was carried over into *The Secret Doctrine* and later literature. In the interpretation of the teachings, however, this term somehow became crystallized and was more and more used to apply to physical evolution and ethnic groups, and to the term "race" as it is generally used, instead of its special meaning. The great concept of each root-race being a new phase of human evolution in which the whole of mankind shared—that is the unfoldment of each new sense and level of consciousness—seemed to become largely overlooked. As Geoffrey Barborka wrote in *The American Theosophist* (February 1970):

> . . . the term "Races" is responsible for confusion on the subject. The word does not convey the meaning intended, especially when the prefix "Root" is omitted—as very often happens. For that matter, the ethnic connotation destroys what Theosophists mean by "Root Races."

Wallace Slater, in his very valuable article, "Races, Civilization, Cultures," which appeared in *The Theosophist* (February

1971) points out that "the story of Man is not as clear-cut and straight-forward as simplified versions in elementary Theosophical textbooks may have implied." The outline in fact is very confused and could therefore be misleading. Mr. Slater refers to Stanza 11 in Anthropogenesis (*The Secret Doctrine*) which indicates that the later Third Root-Race and the whole of the Fourth were destroyed. "This was when the Fifth Race was in its infancy." (Vol. 3, p. 349.) One of the sections which has caused confusion among students relates to the statement in Stanza 12, Sloka 47, which reads: "Few remained. Some yellow, some brown and black, and some red remained." This has been interpreted to mean that some of the Lemurian and Atlantean races remained and from this concept has possibly arisen the views already mentioned regarding the descendants of the Third and Fourth Root-Races. As Mr. Slater points out, the commentary does not refer to the Lemurian and Atlantean races, for the commentary specifically states that this sloka "relates to the Fifth Race," and especially to the sub-division of the first sub-race of the Fifth Root-Race. (Ibid., Vol. 3, p. 350.) This the writer interprets as ". . . the first warning not to be too dogmatic in classifying existing branches of the human race."

This same idea is also given in the following quotation:

> The Aryan races, for instance, now varying from dark brown, almost black, red-brown-yellow, down to the whitest creamy color, are nevertheless of all one and the same stock, the Fifth Root-Race, and spring from one single progenitor, called in Hindu *exotericism* by the generic name of Vaivasvata Manu . . . (Ibid., Vol. 3, p. 252.)

It is interesting that Sri Madhava Ashish, in his book on the Anthropogenesis of *The Secret Doctrine* entitled *Man, Son of Man*, simply classifies the Fifth Root-Race as the Human Race.

Much more could be said on this vast subject, and many questions arise because of the complex and conflicting commentaries which have been written. What I have suggested is by no means final or complete, of that I am very well aware. However, the comments from such students as Geoffrey Barborka and Wallace Slater quoted above, as well as those by others in recent years, draw attention to the challenge which is facing students of Theosophy everywhere. Have we misunderstood the real meaning of the esoteric teaching regarding root-races? Did early writers try to fit this teaching into the anthropological knowledge of the last century or the early part of this century, where it really did not fit? It seems that this is possibly what happened. For instance, references in *The Secret Doctrine* and in other literature to the Australian Aborigines (considered to be remnants of the Third Root-Race) as being little more than animals and as dying out are simply not true, but these ideas were at the time part of the white man's false views regarding the Aborigines, ideas which are now largely dispelled. Some Australian Aborigines still move in tribes on walk-abouts in the harsh Australian interior (which by the way requires considerable intelligence, otherwise they could not survive); but others are living in cities, going to universities, developing technological skills and taking their place in the white man's culture. Recently, an Aborigine became a member of the Australian Senate. Another became a Wimbledon tennis champion.

Not only in Australia but elsewhere there are groups of people still living in a so-called primitive state, without the accoutrements of Western culture, and now Western man, who has polluted the earth and the atmosphere, is beginning to respect some of their customs as being more in harmony with the laws of nature than the achievements of

technology in many fields. There can be arguments that because some people are still living in a simple state they are therefore less evolved (if we use the Western way of life as a yardstick), but the point is that every man is a spiritual being, no matter where or how he may live, and each is of equal value in the scheme of things.

Brotherhood and Unity

If there are misinterpretations regarding the meaning of the root-races, if our approach has been too materialistic, and if the picture is as confused as it seems, perhaps the time has come to rethink the whole subject and to consider our responsibility as to what books are published which give the cut and dried interpretation on the basis of ethnic groups, especially those which could have an unfortunate psychological effect on readers, turning them away from the wonderful theosophical system which is based on these fundamental principles: (1) ". . . the ONE LIFE, eternal, invisible, yet omnipresent, without beginning or end . . . the one self-existing Reality," (Ibid., Vol. 1, p. 70); (2) "The fundamental identity of all Souls with the Universal Over-Soul, the latter being itself an aspect of the Unknown Root . . ." (Ibid., Vol. 1, p. 82.) In these truths lie the basis of our brotherhood, and all differences of so-called race or ethnic group or root-race are only relative.

If we continue to stress the materialistic interpretation instead of the spiritual one, then we are missing an opportunity to contribute to the unifying of the human race on the basis of occult teaching. We are unconsciously contributing to prejudice and racism, even though we may not intend to do so, and we are feeding ammunition to Aryan supremacists. In fact, some people quoting sentences from our literature could almost label us as Fascist, which of course would not be true. Some statements in our literature give the impression that people of so-

called Third and Fourth Root Races may somehow be inferior to those of the so-called Aryan (Fifth Root) Race. This image is not helped by some of our publications which forecast the formation of the Sixth Root-Race some centuries hence in a community in California, which will be all-white and segregated, (which would be against the law of the land today as we know) with no marriage with people in the outside world. If the authors of some of these works were alive today I feel sure they would be writing more in tune with the times and with present urgent human needs, and probably would not phrase their ideas in quite the same way. Therefore, if their works continue to be source books for study, they should be read in that light and not taken as dogma or creed.

If the principle of brotherhood and unity as given in the propositions of *The Secret Doctrine* represents the highest truth, and if brotherhood remains The Theosophical Society's first aim, then surely this should govern the way we look at life and each other, and should take precedence in our studies and in our literature. As the Mahatma K.H. wrote to Mr. Sinnett: "The term 'Universal Brotherhood' is no idle phrase. . . . It is the only secure foundation for universal morality."

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